

6-1-1967

Birth and rebirth as a cultural symbol

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Roberta Foss _____ for the _____ MST
(Name of student) (Degree)

in _____ Art _____ Presented on _____ April 10, 1967
(Major) (Date)

Title: Birth and Rebirth as a Cultural Symbol

Abstract Approved: _____

(Signature)

Frederick Heidel

The corpus of this thesis study consists of a group of monoprints and paintings as well as a written commentary intended as their accompaniment.

The investigation of such a topic as Birth and Rebirth has involved a concern with the existence of symbology meaningful to the topic. The term culture can be clarified to mean both the artist in particular as well as culture in a collective sense. The possibilities of the topic semantically would involve an essayist's approach. This thesis is not a pictorial essay. Birth and Rebirth as terms evoke images which a painter can simply treat as subject matter. It has not been my intention to deal with existing images in a way which would succeed in documenting them in paint. However, for the purposes of the thesis problem, it is absolutely necessary to investigate in terms other than visual.

The subject which insistently recurred in my painting, and once perceived there, in my thought, was the archaic cradle of man, the cave. Within this setting the ritual - and the role of the Shaman -

suggested the power of the initial confrontation of object by man. The force of this impact is not diminished for the viewer today. The visual impact of the ancient tool or weapon can elicit a strong response from the contemporary viewer, but in ways removed in time from the ancient context. A study of such relics thus resulted in a conception of a primordial frame of reference which enables me to participate as a painter in the origins of our culture. The thesis will investigate the specific imageries of Birth and Rebirth in relation to the heritage and accretions of a culture in relation to the way these cultural symbols are now relative to the needs of this painter and utilized by her.

During the activity of painting my state will often parallel that of the child scrutinizing a stick or a stone, experiencing their qualities directly. As an adult, finally I am more aware of the effects of the mediating screen of verbiage. If I can experience painting with the impact of this child, my ability to express in paint will rival the impact made by the timeless artifact.

In investigating the relation of symbology to the subject matter the degree to which representationalism was negated in favor of relative abstraction was also important. Subject matter, that is, that which has pretensions toward being highly representational, involves a commitment to correspondance with the phenomenological world. As such it has trappings which interfere with its apprehension on abstract terms, a condition necessary to the positing of a freshly meaningful symbol. The ideal freedom which is possible for the relatively abstract painting lies in the multiplicity of meaning thereby possible for the artist and viewer. It is too easy to view the world as an

accretion of matter; and think of painting as its imitation in pigment.

Therefore a movement toward abstraction is deemed necessary and forms come to symbolize a simple organic state akin to "stick". Composition was simplified to permit this greater range of interpretation - the spatial content being the inorganic world ground of "stone". This intention toward abstraction further reinforces the larger context of the primordial and the necessity of a direct apprehension of the artist's interaction with her painting elements as if to the direct qualities of the proverbial stick and stone.

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Birth and Rebirth as a Cultural
Symbol

by

Roberta Foss

A THESIS

submitted to

Portland State College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science in Teaching

June 1967

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The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can pidgeon hole any new idea. But it can't pidgeon hole a real new experience.

The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything because a new experience displaces so many old experiences.

Art has two great functions. First it provides emotional experience. And then, if we have the courage of our feelings, it becomes a mine of practical knowledge.

D. H. Lawrence

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Birth and Rebirth as a Cultural Symbol

Primarily this thesis consists of art works, a group of monoprints, small paintings, and larger canvases. This written essay is intended as an accompaniment to the works, and expresses what I have been able to say about them in the medium of language. The subject has been to describe an aspect of birth meaningful to me. The images that birth has evoked in me are those associated with the primordial past, with the womb of culture.

I understand the calling of the artist to be to transform by interpretation the collective heritage of culture in a creative way. By 'culture' I mean both the heritage of the society and the artist's experience of it.

Unless he is split off from contact with his culture, the artist constructs from that which he experiences within his cultural reference. The painting is in fact a record and objectification of his culture.

More than a record, the canvas is an occasion for the presentation of plastic(painted)forms and shapes whose unique relation provides a unity and order conveying aesthetic feeling. This new whole is that which is reborn from the painter and subsequently experienced by the viewer.

The primordial imagery of birth as origin is my subject, and rebirth as the synthesis of plastic elements is my aim.

The task with art works--the monoprints, oils on hardboard, and larger canvases--was two fold, ideological and technical. With some, the monoprints, the

technical was no obstacle. I found little difficulty attaining the control with which to express my ideas. But, with the others, for example the small oils on hardboard, technical problems were considerable. I want to discuss the group of paintings I did considering these two kinds of problems with emphasis on the relative importance they assumed to me.

The monoprint is related to a drawing technique. It offers an opportunity to try a variety of strokes and achieve a kind of control through a short but intensive work session. Using a piece of glass, oil paint and a palette knife, I worked out a series of monoprints which was to be the initial visual effort of my thesis. I found the series to be very exciting visually, exhibiting both contrast between dark and light as well as a mid-range. It was possible to read from foreground to deep space in some of them while all of them offered definite cues to position in the space environment. Some of the monoprints made a landscape reference. Others evoked a more specific reference to the cave, the ritual and the primordial. The outcome of this subject reference was a series of associations in my mind, of images I intended the viewer to follow. Among the images which formed my pictorial vocabulary were several that had word vocabulary related to them. They include for example, cave, bird head, horned humanoid, ritual, fetish, and procession. With these I found I could write a series of word fragments to accompany the monoprints.

The culminating monoprint in the series is a composition packed with subject matter reference. To the right, two dark priestess figures are seen beside a light female fetish form. In the immediate center foreground is a bird head and to the left animal

humanoid figures in procession. Their environment is spatially confining though there is some depth-- it suggests the cave. The free verse fragment pertaining to this particular monoprint is...."the act of painting a ritual, an echo, a sounding, an occasion, a dialogue in a wordless convention, a dance."

The next phase of my thesis investigation involved a group of small tempered hardboard squares. Here the technical problems were prominent. The tempered hardboards were primed and the surface of some of them built up with underpainting white. The resulting surface, textures of varying roughness, has the effect of stimulating my perception. If the surface is smooth, subsequent layers of wash will reflect the clear glow of the light ground. If the surface is textured a value commitment has already been made in the doing of this initial sculptural surface with its subtle value pattern. As more opaque pigment is applied the richness of surface heightens the dimensional appeal and the tactile quality of the painting carries more meaning. The tactile aspect is of importance especially in the painting entitled "Diatribes". Two organic forms were arranged in an aggressive attitude and mood. The color is warm, intense, and vibrant. The forms "bristle" at one another vying for space. The overriding impression is conflict, a clash of forces.

Another painting with a rich textural surface involved a problem of a spatial rather than textural nature. The problem centered on a seedling shape I had at first placed as a negative space or hole in a warm field. Lightening the value of the warm ground in the lower right brought that ground forward and darkening the value of the ground on the upper left pushed it back. Thus the shape, formerly in negative space,

gained a position between the two. Typically, rough texture indicates body, smooth cool texture indicates space. Hence a contradiction was promoted when the seedling shape, a cool smooth blue, becomes more object, and the ground, rough in texture, becomes more nearly space.

Similar adjustments in other value areas established a gradation of spatial depths. In some of the other works, the disposition of hue established depth; in some, both value and hue adjustment performed this function.

Another small painting which presented its unique set of problems was "Mother Figure With Child". This painting was done on a carefully worked ground. The first layer of oil paint was put on in washes. Shapes were painted in at will with little conscious thought given to the compositional whole. But as the paint was handled opaquely on to the canvas, a central large value shape appeared. A portion of this subject was scraped away until the whole figure took on some appearance of mother and child. The scraping altered the value of a portion of the larger shape, and assigned to it the meaning of child. The child was thus "carved" out of the body of the mother. The several simple abstracted forms impinging on the mother were painted out with the exception of a newly formulated green-grey form on the left and a light valued geometric form on the left.

The value range of the painting is not highly contrasting, indeed a rather somber color note remains. The space around the forms ranges from warm to cool, the dark value area indicating the depths of the cave, the whole altering within the larger value mid-range. The brighter colors on the right suggest a possible

light source, as if the cave mouth was there.

The painting of this picture was interesting to me in that while the forms were not articulated by a careful chairoscuro system, I perceived them in their entirety in much the same manner as I know my sculpture pieces. For by sheer physical handling, I see them from many points of view. It was almost as if in painting them I was "handling" them with eye and mind. They are as real to me as three dimensional forms. Yet, I am not saying that they existed from the first in my conscious mind fully articulated, but that once in paint, though in a less than spelled out state, they evoked in my mind the three dimensional objects to which they actually refer.

Other small paintings worked within the frame of reference of the cave exploring the problem of relative articulation of form and spatial positioning. The technical problems I was working on were pointed toward the task of my larger canvases. By working on the smaller size paintings, I was able to explore and develop the vocabulary of shape, range of color, and value which could implement my final paintings.

In the larger canvases, while already comfortable in the vernacular of the cave, I was moved to investigate the forms--especially the organic ones that had appeared in the earlier works. Some of the paintings, therefore, show a special concern for the abstraction of organic form.

The first large painting I will discuss is called "Shaman". My intention for this painting was again to evoke in the viewer the cave and the cave ritual. This painting evolved freely after the experience of being intensely conscious of technical aspects in the smaller paintings. It was done in a few hours. An adjustment

of the configuration of the Shaman figure's head was the only change necessary for the completing of the painting.

The Shaman stands, a yellow ochre relationship of shapes, in the foreground. Organic totems intrude into the right foreground. Suspended in deep space on the left, one in back of the other, in a more intense yellow, are two simple forms symbolic of the Shaman's power. Aspects of him reverberate, first in the dark value shapes beside him, again in the earthly red shape with eye and horn on the right above.

Another large painting in the series is concerned with this same general vernacular. It is called "Processional" and involves animal headed figures. The environment is rife with spatial ambiguity. Some orange areas are near spatially, while others of the same hue and intensity are located on a different spatial plane. Blues of equal value and intensity move in and out. This is accomplished through the careful construction of their immediate environments which contradicts their isolated identical characteristics.

I also intended to work toward a kinetic effect; to show the figures in a plodding motion. The painting has a kind of rhythmical repetition of shapes and an overall dancing lyrical quality that sweeps the eyes along the path of the multiple leg forms. The painting process is related to an orchestration of form. The ritual figures of bird and bear dominate the dance---- are the dance.

The painting "Ancestors" and its accompaniment "Artifacts" is intended to contrast the bits and pieces of archeological remains with the remote ancestors who used them. They should be seen in a diptych arrangement. The palette is the same for both paintings. The relation

to the thesis topic, which I examined at this point, was the rebirth of the past in the remnant which survives into the present.

I intended the vigor of the stroke, the shape to shape relationships, the tolerance of spatial ambiguity, and the animal head as cues to the remote cave setting. (I was continually searching for alternative ways to express and evoke the primeval association complex). "Artifacts" was done with more hard edge control, as a still life, but without a readily identifiable picturing of specific "typical" artifacts.

I began the painting called "Red Intrusion" with a wider range of objects in my mind. In order to explore the organic structure of things--mushrooms and seedlings, jelly fish and hydra, flora and fauna--abstract and composite forms entered my imagination. Their qualities and configurations were discharged and modified into the painting vernacular, and placed on the canvas.

I found it necessary to include the antithetical object to serve as a contrast to the organic quality of my abstracted life forms. It is a sharp shape, angular and flat, the subject of the painting. It intrudes on the organic forms, red and threatening. I found the central problem of the painting to lie in the handling of the discordant red in the quieter harmonic range of colors of the organic objects.

The painting which exhibits the final definition of my exploration of organic form is entitled "Apotheosis". Initially, I applied washes of a medium value range in a search for forms. A large opaque horn was painted in the upper right. In the center foreground, an organic orange nodular form developed. In the midground toward the left, the figure of a man was placed. This

was the initial triangle, the compositional basis of this painting.

As the painting developed, the horn became a bovine animal whose barrel side, flank and leg extended from the top to the bottom of the extreme right. The animal's juxtaposed and interwoven shapes indicated its muscular, sinewy structure. The orange organic form in the center foreground was further articulated by a play of light over its intensely keyed surface exerting a strong tactile appeal. Its environs offering a strong dark contrast to further set it off. A large opaque, grey shape was then painted to dominate the left side of its single projection, a further emphasis of the male figure.

Areas of transition between the points of the triangle were then further clarified by the inclusion of a range of organic forms working as fanning multiples of curved shapes. The curves coming in from the bottom, penetrating to the middle of the composition. Quieted on the left by the gray shape, they are forced into diagonal space by the staccato of the more opaque elongated forms of the animal's belly and flank.

Developing diagonally from the upper right, in a swooping curve, a winged figure plummets into the figure of the man. This is the principle kinetic effect of the composition.

The last redefinition of the triangle included the placement of a red disc to the right of the horn to symbolize the heavenly aspect of the land. The lower point came to symbolize mantis, while the third point centered on the head of the man. Man, mantis and disc make up the final triangle.

In the center of the triangle is the focal point

of impact as the man is struck by the falling winged figure. The range of visual experience, spatial effects, the kinetic aspect of the man struck, and the thrust of life forms intruding into space offer a culmination of my thesis project.

My thesis problem has been significant for me, since it has in effect provided a culminating experience in my aesthetic development, the full implications of which I have not yet realized.

In the earlier portion of my written thesis, I have explained some of the considerations that were important to the different paintings that compose the visual aspect of the thesis. My intention was to build in the viewer, reader a composite idea of what the paintings were about. In this portion, I intend to focus on the experience of painting as a whole and describe what I can of the changes which have taken place in my understanding of the painting process itself.

The change that occurred in my painting had to do with a shift from subject matter emphasis to plastic relationships. After having set up the shape to shape relationships, I applied intuitional or rational faculties and literally called the shapes and groups of shapes by names, i.e. bird-headed figure.

I have always been prone to name things, to classify them. This is certainly the part of my enculturation which hampers aesthetic growth. This taxonomic inclination had to be transcended before an objectified expression of the culture could be made.

So, after the naming process had taken place, this verbal appeal to subject matter had to be transcended by a different kind of meaning. The plastic meaning of the painting had to be primary, subordinating to itself

subject matter reference. Painting then became a thing in itself, seen for itself; important in terms of its formal composition, not for its resemblance to any namable subject outside of itself.

The process of moving beyond subject matter into the realm of plastic form, for itself, was the most difficult part of my thesis painting. Transcending the urge to name could only take place for me when the painted elements could be responded to directly in painterly terms.

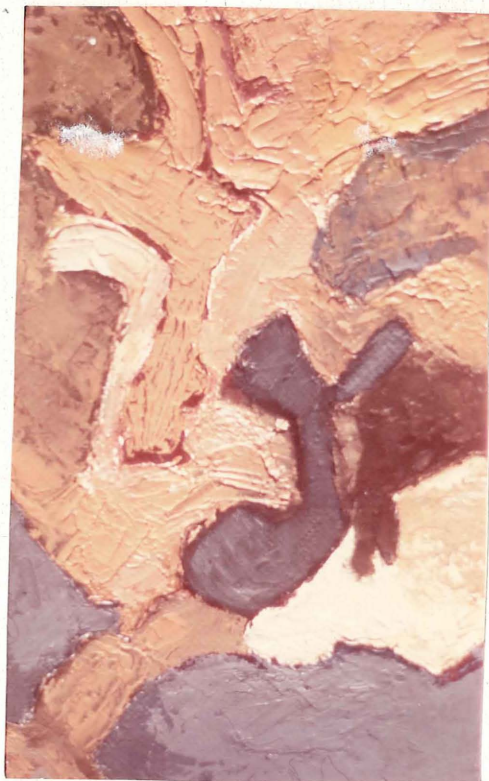
The painting must be responded to directly; its intentions anticipated in plastic terms. The artist is the instrument which brings it to fruition as an objectification of the culture.

I have a differing degree of rapport with each of my paintings. Each painting is a direct expression of my inward intangible self which is in effect reborn as a physical ordered objective entity. But more than that, it stands alone; it exists in independent form on its own terms as a painting.

Without further comment, the color reproductions of my paintings follow this written portion of my thesis:



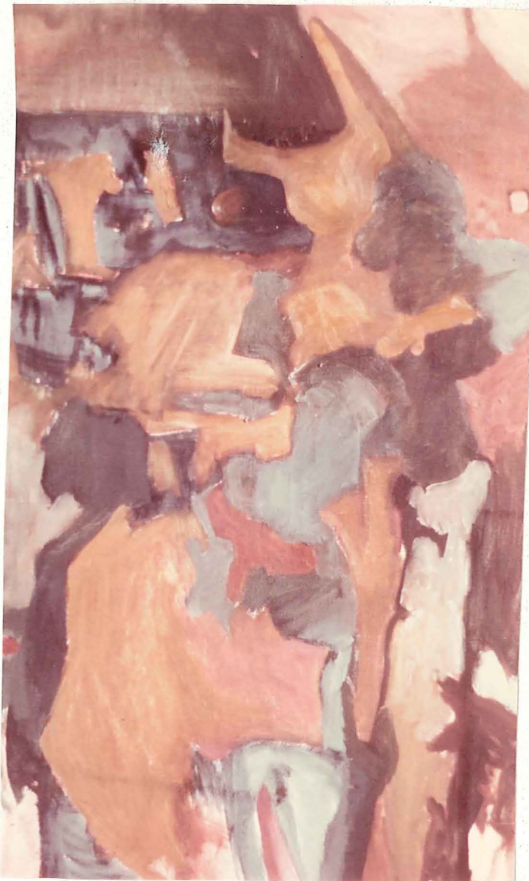
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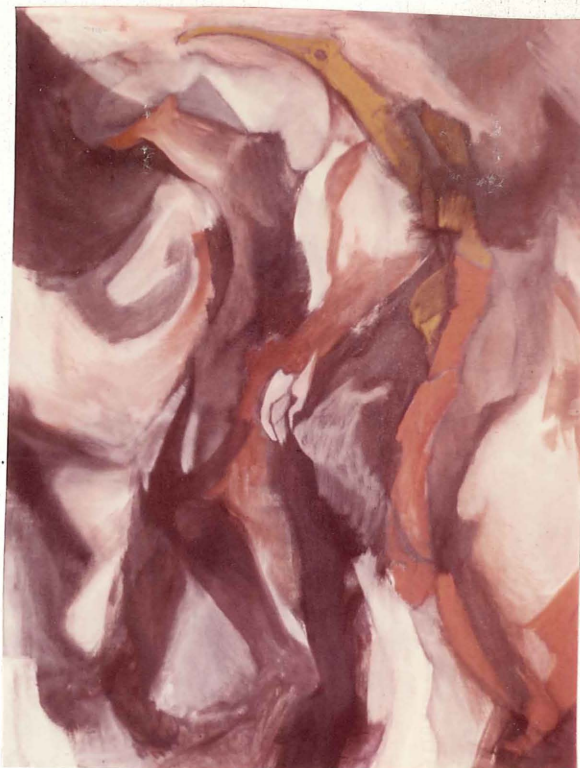
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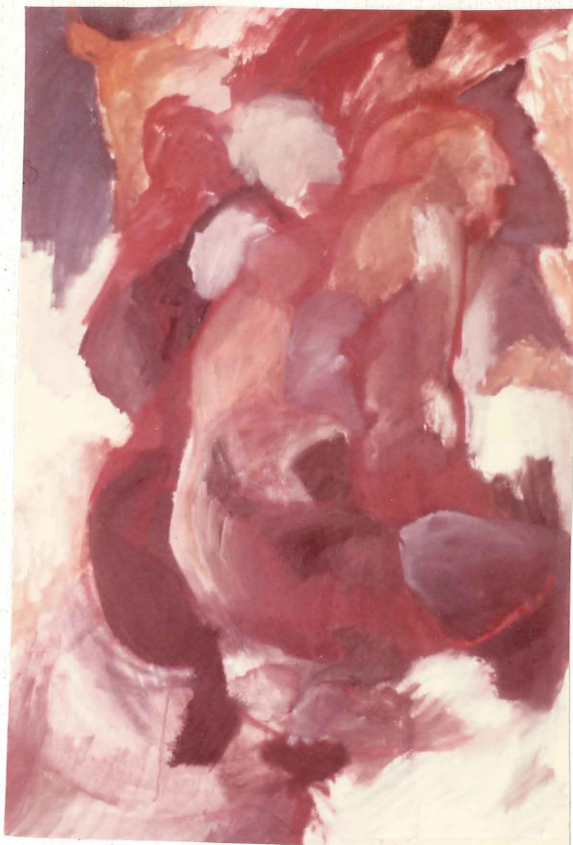
"Mother Figure with Child"



"Shaman"



"Processional"



"Ancestors"



"Artifacts"



"Red Intrusion"



"Apotheosis"

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